

# Big Mountain Update

Fifth Estate Collective

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Sometimes no news is good news, and that seems to be the case with the folks at Big Mountain. According to Matt Strasberg (of the Big Mountain Legal Defense/Offense Committee), the July 7, 1986 deadline passed quietly. Indian activists, supporters and the media showed up for the showdown, but U.S. marshals declined to make an appearance. Claiming that the deadline was merely a "target date," government officials have been close-lipped about their inability to overcome Hopi and Navajo resistance and to complete the relocation project.

Unlike the past, when relocation meant physical violence and dragging people away on trucks, the present administration favors a much more subtle (if equally brutal) method of coercion. They call it "constructive relocation," which translates roughly into a policy of surrender or starve. The Hopi and Navajo people still remaining at Big Mountain, estimated at some 500 families, are fighting a war of attrition with the government. Water diversion projects make it almost impossible to water livestock. Fencing projects impede access to grazing and sacred lands, and regulations ordering 90% livestock destruction have cut herd sizes to a level insufficient to support the needs of the families.

A construction freeze on any new buildings has served both to demoralize the people (by forcing several families to share the inadequate space of a single hogan) and to prevent the young women from following the traditional way of establishing their own families in new hogans built on their mothers' ancestral lands. Some JUA (Joint Use Area) Navajos have ignored the construction ban in the past, but eleven of these "illegally" built homes were bulldozed in the spring of 1982,

The freeze has also assisted the government in playing the numbers game. In a 1974 census, all people living in one hogan were counted as one family, some families having as many as eight children. Now those children are in the age range of 18-33, many with families of their own, and are still forced to remain in one hogan because of the building freeze. Since they occupy only one hogan, they are still counted as one family by the census department in 1987. The government uses this gross underestimate of the population to determine the amount of land necessary for their survival and to show outsiders (particularly Congress) how "few" Navajo will be affected by the relocation.

## Relocation is Cultural Genocide

As of the deadline, the Relocation Commission claims that it has relocated 1,024 families, 458 to on-reservation sites and 566 to off-reservation sites. About one-third of the families relocated off-reservation have lost their "replacement" homes. In addition, the commission claims that about 1,200 families have moved off of Hopi Partitioned Land and have not received a new home. These people presumably were forced off the land by livestock reduction, the construction ban and intimidation designed to convince them of the inevitability of moving.

According to a pamphlet published by the Big Mountain Legal Defense, "Once homeless, the families cannot legally return to the reservation, and are denied further assistance by the Relocation Commission and the Tribe (the government-placed Tribal Councils). They end up living in public housing, trailers, substandard housing, moving

in with relatives, or squatting illegally on the reservation. The stories of those already relocated prove beyond a doubt that to tear traditional land-based people from their land and place them in an urban environment is cultural genocide—extermination of a people and a culture.”

And if moving them from the land which is their spiritual home is not enough to kill them, the government has yet another chance to commit the genocide it is so speedily pursuing. “New Lands” in Arizona have been designated as the new site for relocating the remaining Navajos from the Hopi Partitioned Lands. The area is capable of sustaining only 20 per cent of the relocated Navajos due to an insufficient water supply, but the water that is available is contaminated.

As the pamphlet points out, “A uranium tailings spill into a river that runs through the area was the largest accidental release of radioactivity in the U.S. to date. Navajos moving to the New Lands could be exposed to health-damaging amounts of radioactivity in their water supplies by exposure to the river, and by eating livestock that drink at the river.”

Temporary reprieve in the form of governmental neglect has given the people at Big Mountain a chance to dig in and recoup. It is ironic that this neglect is due largely to the fact that Senator Daniel Inouye, who is in charge of the Relocation Committee, is also the chair of the Iran-Contra committee and has been so busy participating in that whitewash of the government’s dirty tricks in the Middle East and Central America that he hasn’t had time to supervise its war against Big Mountain.

If the Navajos are forced to leave, we will have lost yet another crucial tie to the “original knowledge” that binds all people with the earth. As the pamphlet so poignantly states, “At this time when the ‘civilized’ world is rushing toward ecological, economic and spiritual disaster, we desperately need the example of a living self-sufficient culture of people who know how to live in balance with the earth, how to live so that nothing is destroyed and everything continues to prosper.”

For more information and for copies of the pamphlet (\$1 each) from which the above information was taken, contact: Big Mountain (JUA) Legal Defense/Offense Committee, 2029 Center, Flagstaff, AZ 86001.

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